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FM AMEMBASSY TIRANA  
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC PRIORITY 4380  
INFO RUEHTH/AMEMBASSY ATHENS 2923  
RUEHBW/AMEMBASSY BELGRADE 2718  
RUEHBS/AMEMBASSY BRUSSELS 0672  
RUEHRO/AMEMBASSY ROME 5288  
RUEHVJ/AMEMBASSY SARAJEVO 0435  
RUEHSQ/AMEMBASSY SKOPJE 4116  
RUEHVI/AMEMBASSY VIENNA 2779  
RUEHVB/AMEMBASSY ZAGREB 2940  
RUEPGBA/CDR USEUCOM INTEL VAIHINGEN GE  
RHMFIA/CDR USEUCOM VAIHINGEN GE  
RUEAIIA/CIA WASHDC  
RHMFIA/COMSOCEUR VAIHINGEN GE  
RHDLNC/COMUSNAVEUR LONDON UK  
RUFNPKB/COMUSNAVEUR POLAD NAPLES IT  
RHEFDIA/DIA WASHINGTON DC  
RUEHNW/DIR DTSPD WASHDC  
RUEKJCS/JOINT STAFF WASHINGTON DC  
RHEHNSC/NSC WASHDC  
RUEHBS/USEU BRUSSELS  
RUEHNO/USMISSION USNATO 3271  
RUEHVEN/USMISSION USOSCE 2158  
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SIPDIS

SENSITIVE  
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STATE FOR EUR/SCE (MBENEDICT/DSAINZ)  
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TAGS: PREL PGOV PINR AL MW

SUBJECT: SHKODRA REGION RELIGIOUS TENSIONS CONTINUE

REF: 05 TIRANA 283

11. (SBU) SUMMARY. Religious tensions that flared in Shkoder when a statue to Mother Theresa was proposed for a public spot in central Shkodra have settled somewhat, but there is still lingering resentment between the Muslim and Catholic communities. Both sides cite foreign influence(meaning foreign religious organizations)as a cause of disintegrating religious harmony. The mayor of Shkodra and the Prefect of the region called on the Embassy to lift travel warnings on the area, which they claim are hurting economic development in the region. END SUMMARY.

PROPHET'S BIRTHDAY: A CELEBRATION OF MUSLIM IDENTITY

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12. (SBU) PolOff attended the celebration of the Prophet's birthday which took place in a public theater in central Shkodra on May 17. The standing room only event was co-hosted by the Muftis of Shkodra and Ulqin (Montenegro). The Prefect of Shkodra and the head of the Albanian Cults Committee also attended the event. Notably absent were representatives of other religious organizations from Shkodra. In his keynote address, the Mufti of Shkodra talked about the courage to publicly display a Muslim identity, an overt reference to the wearing of headscarves for women and beards for men. All of the women in the chorus and most of the women in the audience were wearing headscarves.

13. (SBU) Organizational and financial support for the event came from the Islamic Relief, a UK-based NGO that provides poverty-relief assistance.

ISLAMIC RELIEF PROVIDES NOT-SO-SECULAR SUPPORT

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¶ 14. (SBU) In a private meeting following the event, Mohammed El-Waei, head of the NGO, said his organization was increasingly consolidating its Albanian activities in the Shkodra region, the region with the greatest poverty. He said his organization had delivered over \$13 million in direct assistance to Albania over the past 14 years, mostly to the Shkodra region. Such support includes funding for an all-boys madrasa, an orphan education-support project, the operation of Community Training Centers, and a rural infrastructure project.

¶ 15. (SBU) El-Waei said that religious tension in the Shkodra region was increasing and asserted there was increased anti-Islamic sentiment in local government structures and in the media. El-Waei noted that a majority of Shkodra's city councilors were Catholic and that their religious faith was increasingly driving their political decisions. (Note: Although the religious breakdown in Shkodra is roughly 70% Muslim and 30% Catholic, the city has traditionally been seen as the center of Albanian Catholocism. End Note.) El-Waei said that the increase in tension and the breakdown of traditional religious harmony was due in part to "foreign influences". He pointed out that the Orthodox Church, the Roman Catholic Church, and the Islamic community all receive funding from outside Albania. In the case of Islam, however, there was not a centralized religious structure and funding came from a myriad of organizations. El-Waei said that the best way to stem the tide of foreign influence was for the GoA to return religious properties seized during the Communist regime so that all religious organizations could regain their traditional sources of funding.

¶ 16. (SBU) NOTE: Though El-Waei claimed that his organization was secular and was registered as such with the GoA, promotional materials he provided indicate that Islamic Relief was actively engaged in promoting Islam. For example, part of the assistance to orphans includes instruction in Arabic and Islam and, in the past, Islamic Relief had directly supported the construction of mosques. The fact that this organization provided the funding for the celebration of the Prophet's birthday, a religious event, further evidenced the religious nature of this organization's activities. END NOTE.

¶ 17. (SBU) The head of the Catholic Church in Shkodra, Monsignor Lucian Augustini, stated that religious tensions had calmed in recent weeks, but there was still latent hostility between his church and the Islamic community. He said that whereas he previously enjoyed amicable relationships with head of that community in the past, including the sharing of an occasional glass of raki (traditional Albanian alcoholic beverage), in recent years relations had cooled as the local Muslim leadership became more strict in their religious practices. Augustini also said that much of this change was due to "foreign influence", particularly through the training of imams in the Middle East.

LOCAL LEADERS CALL FOR LIFTING OF EMBASSY TRAVEL BAN

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¶ 18. (SBU) Gjovalin Kolombi, Prefect of the Shkodra region, said that the Mother Theresa statue issue had been completely resolved and that all sides agreed that Mother Theresa was a national symbol of Albania and did not belong exclusively to the Catholic church. Kolombi said that there was some lingering tension between the religious communities and that he was using his office and influence to help promote dialogue and mutual understanding.

¶ 19. (SBU) Kolombi was more concerned with the Embassy's current Consular travel warning, which he claimed was hurting tourism and discouraging foreign investment in the region, and not just on the part of Americans. He said that Italians and others also pay close attention to what the Embassy says

about the region. He noted that while such a warning may have been justified a few years ago, the security situation had greatly improved, particularly over the past year. He cited as tangible evidence that a long-held Shkodra tradition of taking afternoon strolls had returned in recent months, after having been virtually abandoned for the previous six years. He also pointed out that downtown shops, cafes, parks, and restaurants are open and crowded until late in the evening rather than shut down at sunset as in previous years. According to Kolombi, this change was due to aggressive policing.

¶10. (SBU) Shkodra mayor Artan Haxhi discussed the area's tourism potential and plans for attracting foreign investment to the city. He said that his office was struggling to establish and enforce urban development plans. He cited the example of unlicensed construction in flood plains and the failure of developers to include sufficient parking. He said that his most pressing need was for unbiased city planning expertise, as was formerly available in the form of Peace Corps volunteers. He indicated that he would welcome the return of volunteers to work for the city government.

¶11. (SBU) NOTE: The Consular travel warning, removal of Peace Corps Volunteers, and restriction on US Embassy personnel travel to Shkoder, were all instituted in the spring of 2005 following direct threats by organized crime figures against Peace Corps Volunteers in particular and American citizens in general. The Embassy Emergency Action Committee will review the current restrictions on Shkoder later this month. END  
NOTE.

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